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ABSTRACT

Several creative classroom activities related to literary studies are discussed in this article. The plays of Plautus, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Shakespeare, Giraudoux, O'Neill, Anouilh, T. S. Eliot, and Goethe are read as the basis for comparative studies. The author discusses the problem of reading Latin plays in translation and comments on student plays and interdisciplinary projects. A seminar planned around the character of Socrates is examined. (RL)

Classical Humanities for High School Students

by
Marjorie W. Champlin

Every good teacher in the field of Classics has the qualities of a chameleon. He is capable of responding "to various moods or to surrounding conditions," as Webster says a chameleon does. Innovation and creativity have always been the hallmark of successful classroom instruction. An instructor whose teaching activity includes acute mental training and outlets for creativity helps his students to discover within themselves the best mental resources. Even without the pressure of educational reformers, I have kept a Humanities program operating for many years, along with the training which Latin I through IV customarily provides.

This paper will describe a few of the creative activities along literary lines, in art, and on the stage which have been used in the Latin program at North Kingstown High School.

Some of you may consider it heretical when I explain that for some years, I have acquainted my students with classical plays, beginning with the Freshman year, by reading some of them in translation during the fifth hour of each week. I do not feel that this supplementary activity needs to interfere with the more intense reading and close examination of Greek and Roman plays on a college level. No classical work would have had permanent value, if it had been devoid of significance after one reading. I have reason to believe my program has taken away a fear of the unknown and encouraged on a higher level a closer look at that which was somewhat familiar.

Thus various students in my classes have made carefully executed comparative studies of such plays as:

1. Plautus' Menaechmi and its derivative play, Shakespeare's Comedy of Errors.

2. Plautus' Amphitryon and Jean Giraudoux's Amphitryon 38.

3. Aeschylus' Oresteia and Eugene O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra.

4. Sophocles' Antigone and Jean Anouilh's Antigone.

5. Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus and T.S. Eliot's The Elder Statesman.

6. Euripides' Iphigenia Among the Taurians and Goethe's Iphigenie auf Tauris.

In a program of this nature the student builds through his own experience a positive proof of the pervading influence of Classical literature on most later European and American writers of any significance.

One cautionary note—someone may suggest that there are inherent dangers in a literary endeavor of this type. If the student does not read the play in the original, he naturally misses a significant number of its literary excellences. Some of the unfair bias which does develop because of this handicap can be eliminated by discussion of literary techniques, not possible of translation, leaving the student to compare on his own the plot, theme, and character of the plays. Incidentally, this occasion is one of the best to point out the necessity of

reading great literature in the original tongue, at least on a college level.

While writing this paper, I began to wonder whether it had ever passed through the mind of Sophocles, who was a punster, that the name Antigone, could be split into two Greek approximates ἀντί γυνή "anti-woman" or ἀντί γονή "against childbirth." If there ever was an unyielding, masculine character Antigone was one. At this moment I can think of one passage in the play Antigone which I should like to check against this newborn insight. Reading the proper name "Antigone" in English yields no light on the possible interpretation Sophocles might make of it. This word and so many other words remain locked in insignificance for anyone not familiar with Greek. Judging alone from my reading of Sophocles' in the Greek, I should estimate that an ability to analyze a word in the original was an absolute necessity in understanding the plot of Oedipus Tyrannus and Oedipus at Colonus.

For many years the comparative and derivative literature study in my class was limited to the reading of plays and the assignment of written studies analyzing the content. In the last two years, however, my pupils and I have actually staged two plays, one Sophocles' Antigone and the other, Plautus' Amphitryon, both given in translation.

The play Antigone provided an interesting insight into the effectiveness of a Greek chorus. It became so evident that the choral odes, recited responsively as strophe and antistrophe,

added a forceful vigor, freshness, and variety to Sophocles' play. Delivered in an antiphonal manner, these lines rang with their own colorful cadence. Then our version of Antigone could boast a forceful and effective Creon, Jonathan Burchett, a boy headed for the Baptist ministry. Jonathan spoke his lengthy speeches with the fiery zeal of Jonathan Edwards for whom he was named.

A few footnotes on Amphitryon: Our version of Amphitryon was staged when student doublets were on hand. Sosia's doublet, Mercury, actually resembled him in coloring, height, and build. Just as Sosia's piquant humor made him a pivotal character in this superb comedy, so our Sosia, quick-witted and tricky in real life, was the mainspring of our own play. The play surged with life when Richard Hamilton was on his mettle. During rehearsals it was sometimes necessary to curb his unbridled, witty improvisations. During actual performances I held my breath hoping for his self-containment.

Amphitryon provides a spectacle of fooling at its height. Considering the number of versions which have entertained generations of play-goers, I do not believe my enthusiasm for this drama is misplaced.

Let me quote some witty repartee between Sosia and Mercury, who overhear each other but are avoiding confrontation:

Sosia: Figuring the poundage in his punch! Poor me!

Mercury: What if I put him to sleep with a soft, slow sock on the jaw?

Sosia: You'll save my life—I haven't been to bed for three nights running.

Mercury: One tap, with this fist, and I should be able to change a man's looks.

Sosia: He's like the fellows who fix up statues. He's going to make me a new face!

Mercury: If you really hit a man, you should knock every bone out of his head.

Sosia: Say, maybe he's thinking of filleting my face like a fish! Keep me from a fellow who fillets folks!

It was just such lines as these that filled our auditorium with spontaneous mirth when an appreciative audience of high school Latin students from around our state came to North Kingstown. As these students laughed and applauded delightedly, they brought the performance to a peak of excellence.

One slapstick scene which evoked good-natured guffaws from this group occurs in Act. III. There a lacuna of some 300 lines occurs. With the aid of the English Creative Writing Class and our own creative talents we filled the lacuna with laughter, hoping to out-Plautus Plautus.

The last major programed effort I have made to fit into a changing educational environment kept me in fateful suspense. I planned a Seminar centered around the character of Socrates. One of its intents was to show how relevant were the concerns of his life.

In preparation for the Seminar, I met with two history teachers who were each furnishing two students from their Ancient

History courses. It was agreed that their four bright Freshmen would provide the historical background in brief of late Fifth Century Athenian life: the judicial system, the results of the Peloponnesian War, the Thirty Oligarchs, and depictions of the personalities of Alcibiades, Critias, and Charmides.

As our program evolved, the next portion of the Seminar consisted of contrasting conceptions of Socrates, extracted from Xenophon and Aristophanes. Two upperclassmen, one a Junior and the other a Senior read and selected portions of Xenophon's Memorabilia for comment. The Senior, Maria Acciardo, chose an exquisite passage on the nature of brotherly kindness. It had the brilliancy and lustre of a gem. After this a Junior boy analyzed Aristophanes' "Clouds" in terms of its portrayal of Socrates as an irresponsible Sophist. I suspect this boy had not done as much preparatory research into the nature of Sophistic teachings as he was invited to do, but his mind is so clear and he so successfully hit upon fundamental points in depicting Socrates as a truth-seeker that I was glad his lack of conscientious research had made him think more deeply about the problems.

Before the third portion of the Seminar commenced - though it had been otherwise planned - a thorough-going discussion of philosophic issues got underway. Questions such as these were discussed: "What effect do absolute standards of honesty and justice have upon those who hold them and upon a society which calls for compromise." The fictional Antigone and the living

personality of Socrates were cited as idealists who refused to compromise.

Returning to the Seminar discussion, I recall that with a mention of compromising ideals, someone remembered that one of this year's seniors said with a sense of horror that if one continued to compromise ideals, one stood for nothing at all. The issue produced a good deal of brow-knitting and no absolute conclusions.

Then a second question was posed: "Was Socrates' instruction in any way responsible for the later conduct of Alcibiades and Critias?" How responsible is an instructor for the corruption of one of his students in later life? So vigorously did the Junior, who reported on Xenophon's Memorabilia, come to Socrates' defense here, that the rest of the student group was cowed and the question was dropped.

After several other relevant questions were propounded, the Seminar was reinvigorated by a series of brief commentaries on Socrates and his teaching as seen through the focus of six Platonic dialogues.

It had been planned that the Seminar would conclude with a modern trial of Socrates on the basis of the ancient charges. However the time allotted for the Seminar lapsed, precluding this portion of the program. I felt that the Seminar generated much genuine interest and that a sequel would be justified.

If your Classical program on a high school or a college level is proceeding at break-neck speed and the level of appre-

ciation for pure intellectual activity is gratifying, I envy your ivory-towered position. I know what exciting intellectual challenges it can offer. But if your community has no strong cultural interests, if your school committee members tend to look askance at Latin, and are easily convinced by the so called Modernists that Latin and Greek no longer have relevance, then you may profitably employ creative techniques to bring one phase of the curriculum into conjunction with another. Can anyone maintain that to memorize the lines of a play is any less a mental discipline than to memorize grammatical rules in a Latin Composition Book?

Before closing let me tell in a few sentence about three other cultural programs which have made the Classics memorable for some of my students. On one occasion the head of our Music Department discussed the structure of Greek tragedy as it was carried over into the form of an Opera.

On another occasion two members of the Art Department volunteered to work with my Latin students. One new teacher gave an illustrated lecture principally about the art and architecture at Pompeii. Over a period of several months the Head of the Art Department planned several projects with me, in which students carried on art activities in my class, correlated with their learning experiences. Mrs. Rose, Art Department Coordinator, brought poster paint, pastels, and paper; and each student, an artistic novice, reduced some tiny segment of the Classics to a

visual display.

The freshmen used pastels to represent scenes from Mythology. The upperclassmen were invited to plan and paint within a group a mural reflecting their recent reading. The second year classes made a collage, showing the "Eruption of Mount Vesuvius." The third year class some weeks later executed a four-sectioned mural exhibiting the Hunting Scene from the fourth book of the "Aeneid." The results were exhilerating. Mental discipline let loose in colorful creativity.

Already my mind has leaped into the next school year, and I have visualized the happiness of staging Aristophanes' "Clouds." In anticipation thereof a second year student has put up a huge sign in the glass window above my door. It reads with Aristophanic mischief, "THE THINK SHOP."

Sometimes it can be pleasing to be a classical chameleon.

PORTRAIT OF SOCRATES 469 B.C. - 399 B.C.

I. Background Scenery - 5th Century Athens

A. History of Times: John Janss, Jay Bartos
Jan Jarman, Bobby Cahoon

II. Distant Views

A. Conflicting views of Socrates; Xenophon's "Memorabilia" and Aristophanes "The Clouds"
Maria Acciardo - Karen Burchett, Mike Fournier

III. Foreground Perspectives

A. "Symposium" - Patty Berg
B. "Lysis" - Buffy Harper
C. "Meno" - Andrew DeLisle
D. "Charmides" - Mike Williams
E. "Phaedo" - Mary Wells
F. "Apology" - Edwina Bullock

Compare Christian and Greek Ideals

IV. Appraisal of His General Image

1. What effect do absolute standards have upon those who hold them and on a society which calls for compromise? Must one sacrifice ideals to live in society? (Antigone and Socrates)

2. How many Socrates could live as Socrates did and not hamper society's machinery?

V. Modern Trial on the basis of Ancient Charges

A. Charges: Corrupting of Youth and Introducing New Gods.

1. How responsible was Socrates for the later conduct of those who earlier were his students? (Alcibiades, Charmides, Critias)

2. Belief in Homeric gods challenged. Socrates once said people should not look to Homeric gods for examples of moral conduct. He also said the sun was not a god.